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SUBJECT: DARFUR: MOMENTUM ON COMMANDERS CONFERENCE

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[1](#)1. (SBU) Summary and comment: The long-proposed conference of Darfur Peace Agreement (DPA) non-signatory commanders is moving forward. Following a January 15 Sudanese government guarantee of security assurances, the AU may begin to transport rebel commanders to a conference site in North Darfur within the next five days. Continued rebel infighting, however, could still derail the conference. While recognizing that any movement to advance the political process is positive, the USG should support UN and AU efforts through direct engagement with non-signatory leaders to 1) articulate the benefits of participation in the conference; 2) emphasize that ongoing disunity strengthens the Sudanese government's hand and makes a solution to the Darfur crisis less likely in the near term; 3) underscore the negative consequences of two competing conferences of rebel factions; and 4) urge them to use the conference as an opportunity to resolve their differences. This will contribute to whether the conference is seen as a process-oriented attempt to unify the rebel movements in support of peace or as a one-time event that could further splinter the rebel movement. End summary and comment.

NEW MOMENTUM AND US ENGAGEMENT

[1](#)2. (SBU) In recent days, the UN and the AU have demonstrated a newfound willingness to facilitate a conference of DPA non-signatory rebel commanders. In a January 13 note verbale, the AU requested Sudanese Government security assurances for a commanders conference to include Osman Bushra, Abdul Yahya, Jar Al Nabi, Suleiman Marjan, Saddiq Burra, and Abdul Baker. The note also asked that observers from the USG, EU, the UN Mission in Sudan (UNMIS), and the AU Mission in Sudan (AMIS) be allowed to attend. The Government responded with a January 15 note granting the security assurances. Pending logistical arrangements, the AU could begin to transport rebel commanders to an as-of-yet unspecified location in North Darfur within the next five days. The conference would aim to promote unity among the plethora of rebel factions, increase their bargaining position vis-a-vis the Sudanese government, and enhance the chance of success for a broader political dialogue as stipulated in the November 16 Addis Ababa framework -- all of which would advance the political process in Darfur and encourage non-signatory leaders' support of the DPA. Despite the Sudanese government guarantee of security for the conference, however, continued rebel infighting could derail it.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Building on the momentum generated by the recent

visits of UN Special Envoy for Darfur Jan Eliasson and New Mexico Governor Bill Richardson (reftels), the USG should support the UN and AU in their efforts to organize the conference. Through direct engagement with non-signatory leaders -- in both Sudan and Chad -- and with the Chadian and Sudanese governments, the USG should: 1) articulate the benefits of participation in the conference; 2) emphasize that ongoing disunity strengthens the Sudanese government's hand and makes a solution to the Darfur crisis less likely in the near term; 3) underscore the negative consequences of two competing conferences of rebel factions; and 4) urge them to use the conference as an opportunity to resolve their differences.

EFFECTIVENESS LINKED TO INCLUSIVITY

14. (SBU) Though any movement to advance the political process is positive, the effectiveness of the conference will depend on which non-signatory leaders it includes. Reports indicate that a faction led by Adam Bakhit and Khamis Abdullah met with representatives of the Justice and Equality Movement (JEM) in Chad in the last week. They are not planning to attend the conference, and JEM has claimed that it may hold its own, competing conference. The USG should engage with Bakhit and other G-19 leaders to outline the benefits of attending the AU-supported conference and encourage them to use it as a forum for resolving their differences with other non-signatory groups. Bakhit's attendance would lessen the likelihood that the AU commanders' conference would further splinter the non-signatories and could draw him away from JEM, whose stated goal is the overthrow of the Sudanese government. In turn, the USG should engage with the

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non-signatory leaders who are already planning to attend the conference, including Bushra and Al Nabi, to underscore the value of Bakhit's attendance.

15. (SBU) The level of inclusivity and the success of the conference will depend on whether it is perceived as a one-time, two-day event or a process-oriented attempt to unify the rebel movements in support of peace. This approach would allow the conference to evolve over the course of several days and leave the door open for a follow-up conference after this initial "test run." According to the AU, the Sudanese Government is willing to accept the participation of any commanders interested in attending the conference, provided they do not represent JEM. The international community, including the AU and the UN, are unified in encouraging a process-oriented approach while supporting the commanders to take the lead in structuring and organizing the conference, with AU logistical support.

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS

16. (SBU) The Sudanese Government's January 15 note appointed Presidential Advisor Maghzoub al-Khalifa as the government's point of contact for the conference and stipulated that the "expected support by the UN for that conference should be provided directly and not through UNMIS." UNMIS has not received any clarification on this point, but is planning to send its head of office in El Fasher and a security officer as observers. The rebels have welcomed international observers, as they believe the government is less likely to attack the gathering if they are present. The AU has said its role will be limited to facilitating logistics for the conference. The EU plans to send a working-level observer, and Post is also prepared to have a political officer attend.
HUME